

**ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
EXRESSWAY SUITES, FARGO ND**

November 18-19, 2021
1:00 PM

Meeting called to order at 1:00 PM by Chairman Murray Strom. Pledge of Allegiance and a Moment of Silence observed for POW/MIAs, those serving overseas.

ACOVA Roll Call:

Present:

Brian Bartlett	Gary Maddock (remote)	Murray Strom
Joseph Bialke	Dean Overby	Jim Verwey
Mamie Havelka	Dave Rice	Glenn Wahus
Dave Hilleren	Tom Ryan	Hal Weninger
Vernon Laning		

Absent - Excused:

Richard Belling (arrived late)	Dan Brown
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Guests:

none

Dr. Breton Weintraub, Fargo VAHCS Director

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. COVID related activity is at an elevated level, but it has been manageable. We have had to transfer veterans to Grand Forks or Bismarck as community hospitals are too busy. Staffing issues are a problem and may need to shut down outpatient services to take care of inpatient services. The vaccine booster campaign is going well. VA staff are mandated to get vaccinated. We do have a high rate of vaccinations, in excess of 90%. Projects going on: replacing current boiler plant which is 40 years old – hoping new boilers in place by January and hoping to establish Mental Health Clinic outpatient unit in a few years. Thanked Commissioner Wangen for his help with the Fisher House, land acquisition going on at this.

Question about losing staff over mandated vaccination.

Dr. Weintraub: 100 have asked for exemptions, we are working through the process.

Question about burn pit exams

Dr. Weintraub: he is not sure about the status of the exam.

Question about exemptions for employees.

Dr. Weintraub: Employees have been notified as to the date for filing for an exemption. He is unsure of any appeal rights.

Dr. Weintraub gave information on Fisher House – VA Central Office is working on the land acquisition, they want something near the facility at least within walking distance.

Mark Johnson, Veterans Home Administrator

The memorial gardens are in the bidding process. Bids are being opened today to increase the area for the nurses station and supervisors. Marketing campaign – developing three commercials for tv and two for radio. Staffing levels are low, vaccination rate for staff is 50-60% and 90% for residents. It's difficult to compete with local businesses, i.e. Bobcat offering signing bonus' and starting pay at \$30,000 a year. The Veterans Home has some incentives such as picking up shifts, increased shift differential pay, and giving a retention bonus. By December 5th, every staff member must have at least one shot or have an exemption (medical or religious). If organizations are looking to donate to the Veterans Home, they could earmark the money to go to the nursing staff, i.e. gift cards. There are 58 residents in Basic, capacity is 98 residents in basic; Skilled could have 52 residents, there are currently 48 residents. The Veterans Home is limited to accept only veterans and veteran's spouses.

Chairman Strom asked committee to review the Agenda.

Motion to accept Agenda by Jim Verwey, second by Brian Bartlett.

Motion passed unanimously.

ND DVA Report – Commissioner Lonnie Wangen

PowerPoint presentation

Commissioner Wangen introduced Bryan Watters, Claims Division, and supervisor of the three State Service Officers.

Bryan gave an overview of his duties within the Department and, in turn, introduced the State Service Officers: Calie Lindseth, Tom Webb and Shelby Moen. They also gave an overview of their duties in the Claims Division.

Chairman Wangen introduced Chris Kratochvil, State Approving Agency Director.

Chris talked about what he does as the Director which is working to ensure veterans get their G.I. Bill benefits. He also handles questions regarding other education benefits whether it's federal or state.

Commissioner Wangen introduced Dan Thorstad, Loan and Grant Officer. Dan also assists with the Funeral Honor Coin, Highly Rural Transportation Grant and website. Dan spoke on his various duties within the Department.

Major Jay Sheldon, ND National Guard Office of the Adjutant General

Strength wise doing well, always looking for recruits. Due to COVID, recruiters were unable to do personal contacts.

Air Nat'l Guard mobilization comprised of small groups and individualized airmen around the globe. Ribbon cutting for Fargo Reserve Center and did ground breaking for Air National Guard at Fargo Hector Airport. Received funding for projects – tracking system needed upgrading \$450,000 and \$2 million for dorm style lodging for Camp Grafton. The Guard hopes to transition Camp Grafton from only military activities to include activities for law enforcement and possible research and development of radar projects. The Guard has fund raising authority for a military museum. They are surveying different locations throughout the State and also looking to have it on the Capitol Grounds. The cost is estimated at over \$24 million dollars. Senator Hoeven and the VA Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs will be visiting National Cemetery in Fargo and tour the N.D. Veterans Cemetery in Mandan. Possible legislation authorizing all state cemeteries to intern service members from National Guard and Reserves.

Richard Belling joined committee.

Michelle Gauvin-Panos, ND Cares Director

Email from Michelle Gauvin-Panos, with newsletter attachment. Commissioner Wangen shared the newsletter with the committee.

Jerome Billups, ND Job Service Veterans Employment Programs Administrator

There is no particular reason for no movement in the unemployment rate. As of 1 October, Job Service received new federal positions that will be able to work with employers and all veterans, previously if a veteran didn't have a disability they wouldn't receive assistance. Job Service is now tracking transitioning service members. They will be looking for and following what is happening at the Grand Forks and Minot Air Bases.

Job Service is hoping to keep service members in the State rather than have them leave for another State.

Break into subcommittee meetings. Subcommittees will be meeting the Veterans Affairs Office.

Subcommittee meetings held.

November 19, 2021
Committee reconvened at: 9:00am

Motion by Dean Overby to approve September 2021 ACOVA minutes, 2nd by Richard Belling. Motion carried unanimously.

Discussion on where to hold the next meeting. Consensus from the committee members to hold the meeting at Veterans Club, Steele ND. The meeting will be in February 2022.

Legislative and Strategic Planning – Report by Mamie Havelka
Reviewed the Strategic Plan and either updated it, made it ongoing, designated it done, or added to it. Legislative Special Session Senate Bill 2351 brought up for discussion. The bill relates to the marriage penalty credit and an income tax exclusion for social security benefits.

Motion to accept report by Dean Overby, second by Brian Bartlett. Motion carried unanimously.

PWTF Subcommittee – Report by Vern Laning.
Reviewed Fund 410 clearing account and PWTF. Reviewed income from Patriotic License Plates and the Income Tax Return check-off. The incomes from 2017 thru Sep 30, 2021 were \$44,625 and \$46,971 respectively.

Discussion on possible ways to raise funds for the PWTF or the Department; since the State is not considered a charitable organization gaming can't be considered. Question raised whether PWTF investments could be made in veteran friendly businesses. State Treasurer is still working on the issue.

***Motion by Vern Laning to accept subcommittee minutes, second by Jim Verwey.
Motion carried unanimously.***

Appeals Subcommittee – report by Vern Laning.

Discussion on appeals hearing that was held on Oct. 22, 2021. Letter was sent to appellant regarding the reversal of the decision to approved, but no response has been received.

Motion by Vern Laning to accept subcommittee minutes, second by Dave Rice. Motion carried unanimously.

Chairman Strom talked about his goals and outlook for ACOVA. He believes his job as Chairman is to give members tools to do their job. If the committee has questions, he will work to find answers. Getting tools for Department staff is also a goal. Administrative Committee has been doing things other States haven't, such as PTSD dogs, HyperBaric treatments, Suicide prevention, and electronic discharge transfer. He wants to work to provide assistance to veterans in getting all benefits they are entitled to receive and to raise the awareness of the County Veterans Service Offices.

Jim Verwey mentioned that he saw a few people in Fargo holding signs, some were veterans, saying they were homeless. Commissioner Wangen talked about the availability of programs in Fargo to help the homeless veterans. Function zero is the goal meaning there are steps in place to help them and their families quickly. The problem is more acute in western North Dakota. Tom Ryan stated there is a homeless coordinator in Williston, she is located at the CBOC.

Chairman Strom asked Dean Overby about the Governing Board. There will be four positions open. Dean felt there should be someone from ACOVA on the board and someone with a financial background would be helpful. The Board meets quarterly, typically at the Veterans Home. Chairman Strom would like any names sent to him so he and the Secretary Verwey can visit with them. This should be added to the February agenda for action. Dean suggested having a National Guard member on the Board also.

Veterans Affairs Subcommittee – report by Hal Weninger

Policy Updates:

- #201 – a. Income and Assets. Punctuation marks removed regarding “Statement”
b. ii add “physical”

#204 – Underwriting:

- 2) “to include the spouse his/her income is considered” if the veteran gives his consent.

Grants:

- #401 – Punctuation marks removed.

b. Residency

1. strike “Government issued” replace with “or other government issue identification and sign statement declaring the applicant has resided in ND for 12 consecutive months with the intent of establishing permanent residency”;

- #403 – 1 Grants have a **\$5000** cap per calendar year per applicant. Policy wasn’t updated after committee changed the amount.

- #412 – 2) Applicant may have up to “**\$6,000 per individual (each spouse) in an irrevocable burial fund.**”

Matches the Human Services policy.

- #413 – 1) Household income limit (**includes the applicant and other adult occupants contributing to living expenses**)...

- 2) Eligibility will be determined based on net income of the most **recent three (3) month period.**

Instead of using twelve months.

- 3) Public Assistance (**i.e....** grammatical change)

- #415 – 1)a. **i.e.**

- 3) After all other deductions, 20% of net income may be deducted for living expenses.**

May make veterans who don’t make the income cutoff eligible for the benefit.

- #431 – 1) **medical/dental** redundant

- 4) Covered procedures:

- a. **medical/dental emergent** need

c.

- d. **Non-surgical gum disease treatment**

- 5) **c. Gum disease treatment not intended for denture preparation.**

Discussion on how this would become a maintenance procedure that someone could get a grant every year for this. This is an important health issue but there isn’t enough money

to handle it. Perhaps there could be a time limit on this, similar eyeglasses, denture. Committee decided a three-year limitation would suffice.

Chairman Strom spoke on the amendment to policy regarding three-year limitation, committee concurred unanimously.

***Motion by Hal Weninger to accept subcommittee minutes, second by Dean Overby.
Motion carried unanimously.***

Subcommittee appreciated having Dan available to discuss the policies and add background for the changes.

Commissioner Wangen spoke to the committee on carry-over funding from PWTF Fund 410 from the 2019-2021 biennium.

***Motion by Vernon Laning to authorize the Department to retroactively use the carryover Fund 410 funding from 2019-2021 biennium, second by Jim Verwey.
Motion carried unanimously.***

J.P. Bialke had to leave early but expressed his thanks to the Department and the staff for their presentations on their role in the Department.

Roundtable Discussion:

Cathy: Happy to be able to work from home. Good to meet the new members.

Lonnie: Very proud of his staff and thought it was good for the committee to hear from the staff on what they do for veterans

Vern Laning: Still on a learning curve. Valuable to learn about the efforts the Department is doing to help veterans. Liked the idea of getting veterans to work with their local service officer.

Glenn: We're all for the veterans no matter what part of the State we're from. We need to continue to do great things for our veterans.

Mamie: Injured military wildlife program – people will take injured/ partially disabled veterans out hunting due to a partnership with the Roosevelt park. When Buffalo are injured and put down, the meat goes to Mandan for distribution. The buffalo meat isn't considered wild so it can be processed. The meat is then distributed to needy veterans. The problem is finding veterans that could use the meat. There is talk about including elk or meat from other animals within the park. This is a program to help veterans.

Commissioner Wangen suggested contacting the veterans service officers so they could distribute the meat to veterans they know in their community that could use the meat.

Hal Weninger: Recovery is going well. He talked about the Hyperbaric treatments he has been undergoing in his recovery and how they have made a difference for him. Talked about establishing a Veterans Endowment Fund where the goal would be to use the

interest from the endowment and every five to six years, they would have a veteran's day at Medora where many activities would be free to veterans.

Richard Belling: Great meeting today. Helpful to have Dan for the subcommittee meeting.

Dean Overby: Enjoy being on the other side of the table (rather than being Chairman). Good planning on the subcommittee meetings using laptops. Attended VVA convention with Hal Weninger and Dave Hilleren. Encouraged committee members to think about and bring names forward for the Veterans Home Governing Board.

Dave: Honor Flight will be grounded in North Dakota due to the Legislature mandating no vaccinations. VA Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs will be here Tuesday to tour the National Cemetery in Fargo. One idea to enhance the cemetery would be to buy a piece of land near the cemetery for families to gather and park their cars and for the Honor Guard to use. There is tremendous support and some opposition to the idea. Jim Verwey asked if there will be a problem for veterans who submitted paperwork to Mandan and now want to be buried at the Fargo cemetery. Dave Rice and Commissioner Wangen both said it would not be an issue. The pre-approval is for any national cemetery. There have been about 500 internments since the cemetery opened two years ago.

Dave Hilleren: Very good VVA conference in Greensboro. There was competition for the organization positions that were open. Next year is the 40th Anniversary of the Vietnam Veterans Wall in Washington, D.C. Discussions taking place about fundraising to help veterans go to the events that will be taking place. This meeting was good and productive.

Tom Ryan: World War II, Korean and Vietnam veterans are eligible for the Honor Flight. He talked to Senator Cramer about PTSD service dogs. There is a quarterly call from VA that everyone can participate in.

Brian Bartlett: Really appreciate meeting Department staff, they were very knowledgeable in answering questions. Having computers made things easier in the subcommittee meeting. Learn stuff every time he attends a meeting.

Gary Maddock: Glad he was able to participate by Teams Meeting but would rather be at the meeting in person.

Jim Verwey: Liked the speakers the Commissioner invited. Wished everyone a Happy Holiday season. Thanked Chairman Strom for the good job.

Chairman Strom: Appreciated being at the Department's office for the subcommittee meeting. Enjoyed meeting the staff. Very good meeting.

Chairman Strom asked for input for speakers at the next meeting. Commissioner Wangen said he could check with Human Services since they oversee many community programs.

Commissioner Wangen announced the ACOVA is 50 years old.

Respectfully submitted:

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Jim Verwey
Secretary